



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

AMERICAN LITERATURE IN THE COLLEGES

BY T. J. BAKER

WERE the noted foreign writers who recently came to this country to do homage to the great spirit of Lowell on the occasion of the centennial of his birth, to be told that in his own country this typically American poet was not considered worth the serious attention of the college undergraduate they would be not a little surprised and puzzled. Yet such is the case. In our leading universities not only Lowell but other American writers are quite neglected, or at best are given secondary consideration. The youth who wishes to imbibe the spirit of Poe or Whittier, or Emerson or Bryant must interpret for himself the writings of these exponents of the nation's life and history, for in his college work he will find them brushed aside for the study of more favored foreign writers.

In one of our best known universities, an institution whose Faculty contains one of the foremost living American men of letters, there is offered no course whatsoever, graduate or undergraduate, upon the literature of this country. Were it not for the cursory study of a few favored Americans in courses upon the general field of letters, this college would seem to be oblivious to the very existence of a national literature. Of the hundreds of splendid young men who leave its halls each year to take their places in the life of the nation, few indeed are acquainted with the *Biglow Papers*, *Leaves of Grass*, the *Commemoration Ode* or other great works inextricably interwoven with the spirit and history of America.

Everywhere the story is the same; our own authors are neglected for the minute study of foreign writers. In a prominent New England university, which numbers its matriculates by the thousand, there is given but one course

upon the field of American letters, a two hour course, "omitted in 1917-1918," which begins with Franklin and concludes with the writers of today. Another institution which feels it unnecessary to offer more than two general half-term courses on the national literature, gives its students the opportunity of devoting their attention to such offerings as the Arthurian Legends, Dante in English, Early English Literary Types, Layamon's *Brut*.

An examination of the catalogues of all the large Eastern colleges reveals not one course on the American poets, not one on the American novelists, not one on American essayists. Although courses on Chaucer, Wordsworth, Spencer and Milton are common, apparently Emerson, to whom Professor Bliss Perry devotes a half term at Harvard, is the only American deemed worthy of careful study.

This unfortunate state of affairs is in large part accounted for by the common misconception that American literature is a part of English literature, and must always and inevitably continue to be so. "Of course," says one critic, "when we consider it carefully we cannot fail to see that the literature of a language is one and indivisible and that the nativity or the domicile of those who make it matters nothing. Just as Alexandrian literature is Greek, so American literature is English; and as Theocritus demands inclusion in any account of Greek literature, so Thoreau cannot be omitted from any history of English literature as a whole."

It needs no deep analysis to see that this is a mere quibble. Surely it should not be necessary to point out that writing in English does not necessarily make one an English writer. If by English literature is meant all works written in the English language, then one must include in it the productions of Whitman and Mark Twain and Hawthorne and Emerson. If our conception of literature is confined to the vehicle of expression, to words and sentences, then American literature has no existence and our colleges are quite right in devoting their attention to the most noted writers in English, irrespective of their domicile or of the theme of their works.

But if we accept as correct the point of view which defines literature as the reflection and the reproduction of the life of a people, there is an American literature, distinct and apart from the literature of England, and worthy of our

attention and study. If the life of the American people is worth understanding, the exponents of that life cannot be neglected in our centers of culture and education. If the simple heart of old New England, with its devoutness, its frugality, its wholesomeness is still a matter of interest to the nation which owes so much to it, one cannot relegate to obscurity the writings of Whittier and Holmes and Howells and Lowell; if we are to understand the spirit of the old South, the spirit which gave us Washington and Madison, we must know Timrod and Lanier and Thomas Nelson Page.

In colonial days, when as a part of the great British Empire, we looked to London for our spiritual as well as our political leadership, it may properly be said that we had no distinctive literature. In a very true sense we were not Americans, but Englishmen living in America. Great significance, and not a little pathos, attaches to the fact that far into the Eighteenth Century our forefathers invariably referred to the mother country as home. To England they looked for political direction and for military defense, from England came the books they read, the clothing they wore, often the very furniture of their houses. For them London was the center of refinement and culture and learning, the great sun in the Anglo-Saxon planetary system which gave life and light to the lesser colonial bodies. There can be no surprise then that so long as we remained a part of the British Empire we should fail to develop a literature that we could call our own. In a very real sense there was no America; how could there be an American literature?

But the colonial period has long since past. For a century and a half we have been an independent nation, a nation different from England, a nation with its own distinctive characteristics. It is absurd to contend that England and America have had parallel growths since the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783, that our common ancestry and the use of a common language have preserved in the two peoples identical feelings and ideals and passions and aspirations, that, in short, the literature of the one people could suffice to interpret and reflect the life of the other.

The great throbbing civilization to which we belong is a thing apart from that of any other nation. It is born not alone of our English descent, of our English institutions

and traditions, our English language, but of the unique conditions which surround us here upon this continent, of the frontier life through which our fathers passed, of the New England farm, of the Southern plantation, of the civil strife which rent us, of the vast industrial development of the past century, of the great stream of immigrants that beats upon our shores, of the ideals of liberty that were embodied in our Constitution and perfected in the political growth of the nation. All these have made us a separate people, have given birth to that thing indefinable but perfectly distinct, the American spirit. Our idealism, our love of liberty, our overpowering vitality, our directness, some would say our rudeness, are not British, they are American, the product of our own life and development.

Were this American spirit a thing unworthy of the attention of other peoples, were it incapable of exercising a deep influence upon the world at large, were it dull, uninteresting, unprogressive, colorless, still it would be our own, and so deserving our study. The first duty of any people is to know themselves.

But the American spirit is not dull or reactionary, it is not entirely local in its influence. It is a mighty thing which fills our own land with life irrepressible and bubbles over to lend itself to all the nations of the world. The American spirit is today a mighty force. What was it but this spirit which brought us into the war upon the side of liberty and justice? What but this that sent 2,000,000 men across the ocean to strike the deciding blow in the greatest conflict of all history? What is it but this that has made America today undisputed leader among the nations; that makes one speak of the Americanizing of Europe, of the future as the American age?

In the field of history and politics and economics there has been no neglect in our colleges of things American. The teacher of these subjects apparently has had a better understanding of his opportunities. He has without apology directed the mind of the student to the development of his own country, and emphasized its importance both for him and for the world. He dwells upon the rich field of American political growth, upon the development of those vast industrial forces which have made us so powerful and rich, upon the transformation of a provincial people into a great world Power.

But the teacher of literature is beset with inexplicable timidity. Before his mind are always the overshadowing figures of Shakespeare and Milton and Chaucer. He dares not make his declaration of independence, dares not proclaim aloud his allegiance to American literature because it is American. He does not realize that he may acknowledge frankly his country's good fortune in sharing in the rich literary heritage that our English forefathers have left us, and yet emphasize the existence, in fact the vital importance, of a literature of our own.

We fancy that this universal neglect of our own writers which finds its reflection in the college curricula is not a little the result of the whims of that creature whom we call the intellectual snob. The good gray poets of New England have been in the past too much the common property of all to suit his fancy. He could earn no especial distinction by an acquaintance with writers known to every schoolboy, writers whose faces adorned the walls of every humble American home. His superior intellect, finding food only in the music of Swinburne or the beauties of Rossetti, scorned the shallow offerings of Longfellow and Bryant and Holmes. The pernicious results of this movement, for it has assumed the proportions of a movement, have been destructive to the prestige of American literature. Two decades ago no educated American was unacquainted with the great American writers; one who reads and loves them today is the object of condescending pity.

What we need in this matter is a breath of wholesome common sense. We must know American literature, not to garner material for displays of superior culture, not even to garner the beauties which it undoubtedly contains, but in order to know ourselves. If the proper study of mankind is man, the proper study of Americans is America. Unless our universities rise to a clear understanding of this truth, they will fail signally in their duty to the nation and to the youth who enter their doors.

T. J. BAKER.